

“The Ships of Tarshish.”

BY

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The Ships of Tarshish.

Who are these that fly as a cloud, and as the doves to their windows? . . . The ships of Tarshish first, to bring thy sons from far, their silver and their gold with them, for the name of the Lord thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel. Isa. lx: 8, 9.

No one knows where Tarshish was. It had perished from the earth before the earliest map-makers could set it down. It lay somewhere below the western horizon, probably at the far end of the Mediterranean as one looks from Palestine. It may have been a part of Spain, near where the pillars of Hercules marked the limit of human enterprise with the warning, *Ne plus ultra*.—There is nothing beyond. It was so far away from Jerusalem that the Hebrews used to think of it as outside of God's jurisdiction. "Jonah went down . . . to go unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord."

All that we know of Tarshish is that it was a city or a country of great wealth. This accounts for its reputation for godlessness, for rich cities are apt to be godless cities. Those hardy mariners, the Phœnicians, were the first to discover this wealth, and Tarshish, like Carthage, was doubtless a Phœnician colony. The Phœnician city of Tyre became the great market for the wares of Tarshish, and it was when Hiram, King of Tyre, made his solemn league and covenant with King Solomon that Tarshish first drew the attention of the Hebrew people. We are told how Solomon built a navy of his own to go with the ships of Hiram. These ships must have been manned by Phœnicians for the Hebrews were no sailors. "Ships of Tarshish," they were called, which means merely that they were merchantmen. These were the ships which brought back the treasure that gave Solomon's palace its unparalleled splendor in the eyes of the Queen of Sheba. "All King Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the house of the forest of Lebanon were of pure gold; none were of silver; it was nothing accounted of in the days of Solomon. For the King had at sea a navy of Tarshish with the navy of Hiram; once every three years came the navy of Tarshish bringing gold and silver

ivory and apes and peacocks." It was a fateful cargo for Solomon and for Solomon's kingdom. A nation's commerce gives a fair criterion of a nation's character, and this picture of Solomon's court might go for a picture of the voluptuous and degenerate court of Belshazzar. The drinking vessels of gold tell us of men who have lost the hardness which made Israel great. The apes and peacocks speak of hours given over to triflings, of kings and princes who have forgotten their responsibilities and while away the serious hours with the playthings of children. Here are the very things which have corroded the morals and eaten into the vitality of mightier nations than Israel, the temptations and perils from which Rome perished centuries later. Surely and steadily this passion for pleasant things and soft living in Israel sifted downward through the mass, until all the people, even to the priests and prophets, were infected by it. The ships of Tarshish brought the white plague of godlessness to Israel. Foremost among all the forces which sapped the life of God's chosen Kingdom and wrought its destruction came these white-winged messengers of the sea,—the ships of Tarshish first.

And so it is no wonder that the good men and true among the prophets and priests of Israel began to denounce this traffic with Tarshish. When Jehoshaphat joined himself with the wicked King Ahaziah "to make ships to go to Tarshish," and the ships were broken in a storm, a certain prophet spoke of it as the judgment of God. "Thou breakest the ships of Tarshish with the east wind," echoes one of the Hebrew poets. When we turn to the book of Isaiah we see how that great prophet included the destruction of these ships with the blotting out of everything that had made for the degradation of his nation. "There shall be a day of the the Lord of hosts . . . upon all the ships of Tarshish." The "daughter Tarshish" and the mother Tyre, "whose feet carried her afar to sojourn," shall be wasted and forgotten.

With this background of history and prophecy, with the knowledge of what Tarshish stood for in Israel and what a menace these ships had been to the moral and religious life of the nation, we are prepared to understand how startling is the vision of Isaiah which we have taken for our text. He sees the darkness which has veiled the whole world breaking up. A new day is to dawn for the world, and it is to begin at Israel. Kings and their peoples will see the light

from far away and will be drawn to it. They will bring their richest offerings and lay them at the feet of Israel's Lord. And as the prophet looks across the sea to catch their sails lifting above the horizon, an exclamation of amazement breaks from him. "Who are these that fly as a cloud, and as the doves to their windows?" these in the van of those princely argosies? Surely they are the ships of Tarshish! Those old-time messengers of evil, the foremost in corrupting the youth of the land, are the first to bring sons unto God. Their silver, their gold, once the price of a nation's manhood and a people's religion, are to be laid at the feet of Christ—"for the name of the Lord thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel." To greet the day of the Lord and to acknowledge and honor the Kingdom of God, the ships of Tarshish are to come first.

May such a vision as this of Isaiah be given to us to-day? We recall the ill-report of our modern ships of Tarshish, the merchant marine of this later time. What a corrupter of men it has been! When the boy runs away to sea, what heart breaking sorrow, what agony of anxiety there is in the deserted home! It is not the dread of the ordinary perils of the deep, of storm and wreck and death, nor the nightly dream of the clutching fingers of the hidden reef, but the dread of the ruin of the boy's character, of ports which are more cruel than the sea, of beckoning hands which are more to be dreaded than the reef. For the sailor's life is peculiarly beset with temptations and the sailor is peculiarly temptable. There is no merchant port in the world that has not its special evil provision for the sailor. The most lawless and dangerous haunts in our own city lie about its wharves, and every seaport has its reputation for drunkenness and immorality. Can we forget the demoralizing influence of the sailor in the Sandwich Islands,—how the whole population of that fairest bit of God's earth was so corrupted and plague-smitten by vices of American and British seamen, that when the missionaries arrived they found a gentle and noble race so far gone in physical and moral decay that they could not save it? Can we forget what John G. Paton told us of the inhumanity of the captains and crews of the merchant ships toward the South Sea Islanders, and how his work was hindered and his life endangered by the hatred of white men which they had inspired? Have we not heard of the impression given of western civilization and of the Christian religion by these "rep-

representatives" of Christian nations in Shanghai and Canton. "To be drunk is to be Christian," says the Chinese. Oh, these merchant ships, ships of Tarshish, what havoc they have wrought in all the earth! What ghastly corpses mark their wake! What evil things they have done to the name of humanity and the Kingdom of our God! Mingled with the odor of their fragrant spices is the smell of moral rottenness, tainting the air of heaven. What price the world has had to pay for the treasure they carry in their hold! What a sacrifice of purity they have demanded from those who go down into the sea! Can we share in Isaiah's vision? May we lift up our eyes round about and see a day when these ships shall fly as white doves to their windows at the summons of their Master, when they shall bring pure lives and strong to the service of the King, "sons of God from afar," and when they shall lay all the priceless treasure which they have garnered from the ends of the earth upon the altar of the Holy One, of God?

Consider for one moment. Would it not seem strange to you if there were no reason for such a hope? Would it not be a thing inexplicable, unreasonable, impossible, that two-thirds of the surface of this earth which God created and which our Lord Jesus Christ came to save should furnish an environment so bad that it is beyond the hope of redemption? On the contrary, think what the sea is. It is the one bit of this earth which remains as it was when it came from the hands of God and He pronounced it all "very good." It lies under the sun to-day, sparkling, in its unsullied purity, unmarred by the touch of man. We may still stand by the brim of the ocean and say without a reservation of truth, "The sea is His, and He made it." It seems to bear the hall-mark of its Creator. There is that about the sea which suggests God to us as nothing else in nature. Even the old Hebrews felt this though they were strangers to the sea. It spoke to them of the majesty of God and of His power. It was what the sea could *not* do that impressed them with God's greatness, the restraint that God had set upon it. "Thus far shalt thou come and no farther," said the Almighty. The sea has a kinder message to us in this day of Christ. It suggests the love of God, "the wideness of God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea." We no longer feel as John felt, the prisoner of the island of Patmos, that the sea was a cruel tyrant separating him from

friends and home, when he wrote these words about the New Jerusalem, "There shall be no more sea." For the sea has become a pathway, a link and not a barrier between men and nations. We do not hate the sea any longer; we love it. We seek it when we are weary and sick and depressed, and there pours into our souls out of its infinite spaces a fresh strength, a new courage, as though we had come in contact with the throbbing life of God Himself. Can it be that the sea has no voice for those who go upon it continually? Why is it then, as Frank Bullen has told us and others who have written of the sailor, that the sea never lets go of a man when once it has got hold of him, that its call is irresistible so that he can never settle down to a life on shore? If the sea appealed solely to the evil side of his nature or if it appealed mainly to the evil side, surely it could not keep its fascination. Men are not made that way in any such numbers. Surely there is something else to which the sea calls. It invites men to endure hardness, to battle with the strong powers of nature, to try unknown seas and discover strange lands for themselves, to a life of continual surprise and constant danger and ceaseless vigilance. Isn't the response to this call evidence of strong, heroic qualities, among the noblest in human nature? Are not the passions that run riot in the sailor just the excess, and wanton waste, and unbridled license of those powers which in their birth and intent were virtues and the great gift of God? When the sea calls it calls to these, and the call is the voice of God speaking from the deep.

And so when I stand with the prophet and look away across the sea, it seems to me that I too am granted a vision of the special contribution which these men who serve the sea are to make to the Kingdom of God. That contribution is to be the consecration to Christ of those strong virtues and splendid passions to which the sea calls. Have they been unbridled, let to run into riot and recklessness? They are to be brought under mastery and made the servants of a cleansed imagination and an enlightened will. Have they been mighty forces for evil? They are to become mightier forces for good. This is the peculiar triumph of Jesus that He can transmute His persecutors into His apostles, as with Saul of Tarsus. When He takes hold of human character, "the last shall be first." In the day of His Kingdom we are going to see what Isaiah saw, the powers that have been strongest against Him marshalled in the van of His conquering hosts. "The ships of Tarshish first."

Aye, there may be an amazed opening of our eyes when the leaves of the Judgment Book are unrolled, and we see what things have counted most for the Kingdom of our Lord. It may be that we shall have a fresh understanding of the words of Paul that "God hath chosen the foolish things to confound the wise, and the weak to confound the strong." The service that we have rendered through orthodox methods may appear poor by the side of that performed by agents whom we never recognized. It has seemed to us that our manner of worship is the only sort God acknowledges. But perhaps God would rather have each man worship according to his taste and after the order of his calling.

You remember how delightfully Kipling describes the plight of the sailor forced to worship in the traditional, orthodox way, and how God sends him back to his own :

"Loud sang the souls of the jolly, jolly mariners,
Plucking at their harps, and they plucked unhandily:
'Our thumbs are rough and tarred,
And the tune is something hard—
May we lift a Deepsea Chantey such as seamen use at sea?'

"Then stooped the Lord, and He called the good sea up to Him,
And 'stablished its borders unto all eternity,
That such as have no pleasure
For to praise the Lord by measure,
They may enter into galleons and serve Him on the sea."

I have learned about all that I know of the seafaring men from my Kipling. With all the profanity and the coarseness and the vice to which they are so temptable, he shows us, and shows us fairly I am sure, that underneath it all, like the deep currents of the seas he sails, one finds a genuine religion, interpreted in terms of reverence and duty. There is that old sinner McAndrew, sturdy Calvinist, and expecting full judgment on him for his sins, but glorified in spite of all by his sublime sense of responsibility as he stands at his post in the engine room :

"Obsairve. Per annum we'll have here two thousand souls aboard—
Think not I dare to justify myself before the Lord,
But—aaverage fifteen hundred souls safe-borne fra' port to port—
I am o' service to my kind. Ye wadna blame the thought?
Maybe they steam from Grace to Wrath—to sin by folly led,—
It isna mine to judge their path—their lives are on my head."

And there is Mulholland, who in an hour of peril first made his contract with God to do His orders, and finds that the only way open to him to exalt the name of God is the dangerous duty of the cattle-ship.

“An’ I spoke to God of our Contract, an’ He says to my prayer:
 ‘I never puts on My ministers no more than they can bear.
 So back you go to the cattle-boats an’ preach My Gospel there.’

“I didn’t want to do it, for I knew what I should get,
 An’ I wanted to preach Religion, handsome an’ out of the wet,
 But the Word of the Lord were laid on me, an’ I done what I was set.”

Surely here is material for the making of sons of God, men who shall bring their gifts and their powers to the service of the King of Kings. Do not take these verses of Kipling as an unwarranted idealization of the seaman’s character. Read along with your Kipling, Frank Bullen’s “Christ at Sea,” and learn how sensitive seafaring men are to religious things. That wide expanse of ocean which rings them round, the great arch of the heavens studded with the nightly stars, the silences and the sounds of the deep, the calm and the storm, speak to responsive souls of the presence of God. They do not know Him. They have strange conceptions of His nature and of His ways. Their religion is often no more than a crude superstition. Their Bible is an unwritten catalogue of signs and portents in the sky and sea, which promise good or threaten evil. And yet there is “the feeling after God if haply they may find Him.”

So the apostolic mission of the Society whose Anniversary we celebrate is that defined by Paul, “Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare we unto you.” It is to lead men to know and love the God who called them to the sea and appointed their service on it, Whose the sea is “for He made it,” and Who writes His message in the stars above them and in the wave beneath. It is to provide an escape for them from those perils of the shore which are more fearful than the perils of the deep. It is to translate the love of Christ for them into kindly service and helpful counsel. It is to bind them to the Christ who knew the sea and loved it, and chose His first disciples out of ships. To bring in the day which the prophet saw, when in the van of all the powers that glorify the name of God the ships shall come first—this is the mission of the AMERICAN SEAMEN’S

FRIEND SOCIETY. It spreads before you to-day the results of eighty-one years of devoted service to this end. It shows you that it has been fitted in the providence of God to do a greater work than ever before in its history. It asks you to help this work by your prayers and your gifts, and in doing so to fulfill the vision of the prophet and the will of God.

American Seamen's Friend Society.

ORGANIZED MAY, 1828.

INCORPORATED APRIL, 1833.

76 Wall Street, New York, N. Y., U. S. A.

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Institutes and Sailors' Homes are encouraged by the Society in seaports. By their moral and religious atmosphere they are often the sole places of refuge for seamen from the destructive influences to which, as a class, they are always exposed when on shore.

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